

AN ANDROGYNOUS NUN'S EYE VIEW:  
FEMININE PITY AND MASCULINE DETERMINATION IN  
THE PRIORESS'S TALE<sup>1</sup>

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Historically, Chaucer's Prioress has been considered a woman of careful delicacy and refinement, of actual or pseudo-fastidiousness, and of traditionally feminine deportment. For Muriel Bowden, she is the "eternal feminine;" Priscilla Martin claims she "is indeed extremely 'feminine' . . . emanat[ing] an excess of femininity"; H. F. Brooks finds her "ultra-feminine"; and George Lyman Kittredge calls her "the perfection of medieval daintiness."<sup>2</sup> Certain of her actions and the demeanor described in the General Prologue suggest an over-concern with protocol, manners, and deportment consonant with her "Stratford-atte-Bowe" French dialect, a traditional kind of feminine mystique. In contrast to her expert simulation, her construction of femininity as precisely detailed by the narrator, there emerges an unacknowledged underlying harshness of sensibility, a proclivity to embellish violence in the most concrete fashion, and a strong, assertive, even aggressive attitude that belies the softness associated with femininity. Such dichotomous responses, a fusion of the feminine at the external level and the masculine at the internal level, suggest an androgynous consciousness, a psychological confluence of the feminine and masculine. By the term *androgyny*, I do not intend to suggest a physical or sexual kind of hermaphroditism, but a mental or psychological emotional state encompassing characteristics of both genders. A very general distinction between virtues of femininity and masculinity might include a conception of softness, gentility, tolerance, and passivity for the former, and strength, power, rigor, and aggressive action for the latter, with no privileging or value judgment assigned to either. Thomas Hahn is right in claiming "her status rests entirely upon her meeting male expectations for a double creature, possessed of both an 'official'

demeanor and an ornamental feminine display."<sup>3</sup> Her unusual dual-gendered role, and hence perception, a synthesis of the masculine and feminine, explains 1) the inability of critics to categorize Eglantine (whose name signifies the sweet-smelling but prickly Eurasian pink rose); 2) their discomfort with her contradictory emotional / sentimental reactions of excessive love or hate; and 3) her inconsistent attitude towards mice (over which she weeps, rather than over the passion of Christ), dogs (her surrogate children), and Jews (whom she despises).

### **I. Character and Role of the Prioress: The General Prologue**

Both the behavior and speech of the Prioress indicate her attempt to instantiate the forms of the aristocratic class to which she was not born, emulating what Peggy Knapp calls "feminine aristocratic nicety."<sup>4</sup> Although her ladylike oath to St. Loy would offend no one, her superficial gentility and facade of a bourgeois-born lady are no more than a veneer. Implicit in this external conformity to propriety is the fulfilling of the proper role of a woman. First, "Ful weel she soong the service dyvyne, / Entuned in her nose ful semely" (I (A) 122-23),<sup>5</sup> a rather pretentious attempt at vocal music, indicative of both feminine and aristocratic status. Priscilla Martin rightly points out that "The Prioress is playing the role of being a woman . . . a virtuoso performer . . . striving for effect."<sup>6</sup> Her pretentious play-acting, her putative powerlessness in being unable to tell her tale without the miraculous intervention of the Virgin, conjoined with her actual power—in telling a potent, if anti-Semitic tale of strength and violence, fuses passivity and action, weakness and strength, feminine and masculine. The Prioress encompasses what Gail Berkeley Sherman calls the "feminine" or "preverbal knowledge that ultimately guarantees or 'authorizes' verbal speech"<sup>7</sup> through the speechless clergeon and the baby less than twelve months old, and the "masculine" or verbal knowledge that she herself can articulate. Second, the narrator claims

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At mete wel ytaught was she with alle;  
She leet no morsel from hir lippes falle,  
Ne wette hir fyngres in hir sauce depe;  
Wel koude she carie a morsel and wel kepe  
That no drope ne fille upon hire brest

.....  
In curteisie was set ful muchel hir lest.  
Hir over-lippe wyped she so clene  
That in hir coppe ther was no ferthyng sene  
Of grece, whan she dronken hadde hir draughte.  
Ful semely after hir mete she raughte.

(1[A] 127-31; 133-36)

This obsession with delicate mastication and tidiness sets up a picture of aristocratic manners and artificial, controlled, feminine fastidiousness, which nevertheless will soon be undercut by her tale of rough violence. Third, she carefully contrives to appear as a courtly lady of good cheer, for she “peyned hire to countrefete cheere / Of court, and to been estatlich of manere” (1[A] 139-40). Fourth, she affects the pose of the soft and sensitive woman with tender conscience, for “She wolde wepe, if that she saugh a mous / Kaught in a trappe, if it were deed or bledde” (1[A] 144-45). But her tale belies that sensitivity, for as Daniel F. Pigg notes, “The tale that Chaucer’s Prioress tells is hardly the tale of a ‘tendre herte.’”<sup>8</sup> On several counts, it fails to be tender-hearted: it recounts a murder and the attendant disposal of the body in graphic terms, it vilifies a race of people who were assumed guilty before the tale began, and it finds no forgiveness or mercy, preferring, even glorying in the brutal retaliation of drawing, quartering, and hanging. Fifth, she establishes a nurturing, feminine deportment in her attitude toward captured mice or hungry dogs, however belied by her attitude toward Jews, or humans who need the food her dogs enjoy:

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Of smal houndes hadde she that she fedde  
With rosted flessch, or milk and wastel-breed.  
But soore wepte she if oon of hem were deed,  
Or if men smoot it with a yerde smerte;  
And al was conscience and tendre herte. (1[A]146-50)

That facade of “conscience and tendre herte” in a tale of affective piety extends only to those she chooses, however. Yes, she displays these traits—sometimes, toward animals—as well as their converse, for she also lacks conscience and tenderness toward Jews and hungry children. The ambiguity in her character can be seen as a gendered polarity in which opposites cohere.

Furthermore, her nurturing *mein* is rather a sham, given her selective application of tenderness. She can be fiercely cruel when she chooses. Thus, despite her seeming feminine neatness, pity, over-careful fussiness, tenderness, and helpless passivity, “*hir smylyng . . . ful symple and coy*” (I[A]119), below the surface Madame Eglantine displays quite another mode of being: a harsher, more determined, forceful, aggressive, traditionally masculine type of behavior. The lady appears to partake of dual gender qualities and behaviors, simultaneously or consecutively. Alfred David describes her style as “that of an artist . . . and for all its positive and negative connotations, she may be considered rather androgynous, despite her fastidiousness and traditionally feminine demeanor.” Such bi-polarity is one aspect of what Edward Condren calls “these subtle—but unmistakable—ambiguities that have divided our responses to the Prioress into ‘soft’ and ‘hard.’”<sup>9</sup> This androgyny emerges in the interplay of both gender characteristics, a seeming deferential, demure demeanor conjoined to an assertive psychological attitude. Her ample protective person (contrasting the very “*litel clergeon*” she would protect), her strong focus, determination, and competence in professional endeavors, and her tale of masculine force and aggression dominate the actions of Jews and Gentiles, while the passive

feminine characters—the mother and even the vulnerable little boy—remain inept and inconsequential in effecting actions. Given his decision to sing hymns in the ghetto, neither can prevent the tragedy of his murder; only through the inspiration of the male figure of Christ can the distraught mother locate her son. The Prioress's superficial feminine veneer of 1) selective concern and protection (for animals, and for some, but not all humans); 2) carefully orchestrated pity and emotion, but only for her chosen victims; and 3) her feminine carriage and deportment—table manners and singing—evidence her more obvious feminine traits, however shallow and unauthentic.

As Condren indicates, however, despite the ambiguous double-edged description of her femininity in the General Prologue, the Prioress's "appearance does not really suggest delicate femininity, for she is not particularly gentle, save to dogs and mice."<sup>10</sup> Condren points to two aspects of Eglantine: her bodily appearance and her emotional attitude, neither of which is particularly refined. Physically, her bulk or ample size is anything but delicate: "For, hardily, she was nat undergrowe" (I [A]156), and even her forehead is broad, conforming to the fashion of the day. On the other hand, femininity can be found in her properly pinched wimple, in "Hir nose tretys, hir eyen greye as glas, / Hir mouth ful smal, and therto softe and reed" (II[A]152-53), in the small coral rosary she carries, in her well-made cloak, and in her equally ambiguous broach of double entendre. With her delicate little red mouth and grey eyes of romance lore, she is not entirely devoid of womanly accoutrements.

Secondly, Madame Eglantine is mentally aggressive: no shrinking violet, no docile, passive maid, for according to Hardy Long Frank, "the gentlewoman who proclaims a humility before the Virgin so great that she can express herself little better than 'a child of twelf month oold, or lesse' is unabashedly ready to admonish monks less holy than they 'oght be.'"<sup>11</sup> This clash between passive humility and didactic domination marks her

conflicting personality. Clearly the contrast between her self-perception—of a weak, vulnerable, passive infant, embodying the feminine mold—and her adamant, self-righteous, almost bullying unfeminine judgments of others as evil perpetrators of Satan's instigation, exemplifies her dichotomous personality.

Further, the Prioress is willing to evaluate, in the strongest terms, the character of the Jews in whose hearts she claims Satan has made his wasp's nest. By virtue of her accession to the office of prioress, Eglantine has displayed qualities long associated with strong masculine forcefulness, a kind of modern feminism eschewing passivity. Frank suggests the determination of abbesses in general in noting that "a prioress was not uncommonly upon the road. Whatever the Rule might say, however the bishops might fulminate, the practical reality in the fourteenth century was that an abbess or a prioress might well travel for business or even for pleasure. Estate matters, legal matters, church matters—all might take Chaucer's Prioress up to London, even perhaps down to Canterbury."<sup>12</sup> Such an administrator did not find deferential obedience the norm. Frank calls her "a thoroughly competent, shrewd professional woman of the late fourteenth century [with] the diplomacy, the finesse, the pious yet politic appeal to many constituencies that her professional role demands."<sup>13</sup> Denying her putative role as "a hapless maiden forced by her unfeeling family into durance vile, sick with worldly longings, her sole solace little dogs and 'litel clergeons,'" he rather finds her flourishing in "a profession with potentially as much social importance as [her] female relatives could anticipate in their arranged marriages, and rather more personal independence."<sup>14</sup> The power and status of a prioress presume her ability to govern, her competence in running such an establishment, and her rank within the community. While it is possible that a woman might possess this strength and power without becoming overbearing or losing femininity, in the Prioress' case, her style, her forceful vehemence, and her obsession with violence preclude this possibility.

Eileen Power reminds us that “Socially in all cases, and politically when their houses were large and rich, abbots and abbesses, priors and prioresses, ranked among the great folk of the countryside. They enjoyed the same prestige as the lords of the neighboring manors and some extra deference on account of their religion. It was natural that the Prioress should be ‘holden digne of reverence.’”<sup>15</sup> Her own excessive strength and self-confidence appear to have brought this prestige to a pinnacle of forcefulness and self-righteous superiority. The meek and prayerful woman who begins the tale rather unceremoniously turns into an assertive, vindictive, imposing force consumed with passion and violence. Frank’s historical approach to the role of abbess well details the duties of a responsible Church official to manage an estate: guide the nuns spiritually and physically, host travelers, act as headmistress of the gentry’s school, provide alms for the poor and ill, represent the convent in its fund-raising, regulate farm and pasture business (rents, crops, livestock, buildings, laborers, markets), oversee the bailiff’s accounts, keep up the convent’s furnishings, heating, hiring, food, and clothing, supervise novitiates, maintain discipline and peace, and model exemplary behavior. Hospitality and social graces to entertain dignitaries and nobility would encourage monetary support.<sup>16</sup> Such responsibilities demand strength, fortitude, determination, competence with subordinates, and aggressive vigilance. Like the Wife of Bath, the Prioress exudes a sense of confident professionalism and independence. A more retiring, demure, or passive woman would surely fail the test.

## **II. The Androgyny of Her Tale**

**1. Style:** Daniel F. Pigg finds the voice of the tale to be “a discursive strategy appropriate to a nun or prioress,” a committed act of a leader in an aggressive use of language “as one means of establishing the Christian community’s position over the Jewish

community.”<sup>17</sup> Her language is forthright, strong, emotional, and occasionally bombastic. Richard H. Osberg notes that “the Prioress apostrophizes with incantatory zeal; fourteen instances of the trope are compressed into 237 lines.”<sup>18</sup> Further, Ralph W. V. Elliott finds pathos in the “repeated use of evocative adjectives, some of them reiterated with powerful cumulative effect.”<sup>19</sup> When she discusses the young boy, it is tender, soft, and bathetic, “feminine” in its emotionality, what D. S. Brewer calls “a sentimental pathos so piercing as almost to verge on mawkishness.”<sup>20</sup> Her protective instincts emerge as she pictures him as an angelic, docile, pious innocent:

Among thise children was a wydwes sone,  
A litel clergeon, seven yeer of age,  
That day by day to scole was his wone,  
And eek also, where as he saugh th’ymage  
Of Cristes mooder, hadde he in usage,  
As hym was taught, to knele adoun and seye  
His *Ave Marie*, as he goth by the weye. (VII 502-08)

Eglantine’s strongly imagistic style creates an idealized vision of a perfect child with whom the audience can identify or whom it can adulate. When she discusses the Jews, however, her style is assertive, harsh, dislogistic, and hostile in its emotionality. For example, she asserts that Satan, residing in the heart of the Jews, instigated their vengeance, and encouraged them to take retaliation:

Oure firste foo, the serpent Sathanas,  
That hath in Jues herte his waspes nest,  
Up swal, and seide, “O Hebrayk peple, allas!  
Is this to yow a thyng that is honest,  
That swich a boy shal walken as hym lest  
In youre despit, and synge of swich sentence,  
Which is agayn youre lawes reverence?” (VII 558-64)



Here, no affiliation or identification is intended—the Jews and Satan are the Other, to be despised. The passionate sense of high seriousness, reinforced by the rhyme royal stanza, and her outrage at the crime enhance the speech's significance, creating intensity through its melodramatic style.

Further, she asks rhetorical questions and uses direct address to heighten the effect of her diatribe, asking "O cursed folk of Herodes al newe, / What may youre yvel entente yow availle?" (VII 574-75). The Prioress's ability to switch back and forth stylistically is a measure of her intelligence, commitment, verbal facility, rhetorical ingenuity, and perhaps disposition. She easily fuses her double consciousness, her two-sided emotional reaction—gentle and positive toward the boy and aggressively harsh and negative toward the putative perpetrators of his crime—which I have called "feminine" and "masculine." As Elizabeth Robertson proposes, "[T]o Chaucer women and Christian spirituality occupy the same marginal space,"<sup>21</sup> thus linking religious language with the female and the feminized. Tonally, the result within the tale is a blend or fusion, neither wholly feminine nor wholly masculine. It is a fit representation of a rather androgynous persona.

**2. Content:** Not a defensive ploy against Jewish aggravation but an offensive politico-linguistic attack by a committed, competent story-teller, the Prioress's Tale challenges the historic place of Jews. It tacitly accepts the implication that Jews killed Christian children for ritual ceremonies; it implicitly condones the cruel treatment afforded them; it maliciously stirs up hatred and anti-Semitism by repeating the legend. In fact, Eglantine is quite absorbed in the Jews, who are the first subject of her tale: "Ther was in Asye, in a greet citee, / Amonges Cristene folk a Jewerye" (VII.488-89). Her invective immediately follows, blaming Jews "For foule usure and lucre of vileynye, / Hateful to Crist and to his compaignye" (VII 491-92). She vehemently asserts that, at

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Satan's behest, they respond to the clergeon's hymn-singing with a conspiracy to murder him:

An homycide therto han they hyred,  
That in an aleye hadde a privee place;  
And as the child gan forby for to pace,  
This cursed Jew hym hente, and heeld hym fast,  
And kitte his thote, and in a pit hym caste. (VII 565-71)

Stylistically, the end-stopped lines and short staccato words detailing the crime create a sense of shock, horror, and finality. Semantically, the depiction of a violently harsh slaughter in all its gruesome detail, with no feminizing muting, offers the audience a brutal masculine reality. Thrown into a privy, the corpse is further defiled. The enflamed Prioress all but screams her vengeance, "The blood out crieth on youre cursed dede" (VII 578). Soon, the male provost enacts the revenge she craves, for:

With torment and with shameful deeth echon,  
This provost dooth thise Jewes for to sterve  
.....  
"Yvele shal have that yvele wol deserve";  
Therefore with wilde hors he dide hem drawe,  
And after that he heng hem by the lawe.  
(VII 628-29; 632-34)

The harsh and violent retaliation, the outmoded eye-for-an-eye ethic spouting from the Prioress's mouth is not modified by mercy, forgiveness, or any other softening gestures, but partakes of unmitigated brutality—the perpetrators are drawn, quartered, and hanged with no sign of pity.

In contrast to this aggression is the feminine, maternal affection displayed for that "litel scole of Cristen folk" (VII 495), "Children an heep, ycomen of Cristen blood" (VII 497), "smale children . . .

in hire childhede" (VII 501), "A litel clergeon, seven yeer of age" (VII 503), the innocent, the "martir, sowded to virginitee" (VII 579) who "so yong and tendre was of age" (VII 524), Saint Nicholas who "so yong to Crist dide reverence" (VII 515), the "poure wydwe . . . With face pale of drede . . . With moodres pitee in hir brest" (VII 586, 589, 593). Her greatest pity, however, is showered upon the idealized young innocent, the "gemme of chastite, this emeraude, / And eek of martirdom the ruby bright, / [who] with throte ykorven lay upright" (VII 609-10, 611). The Prioress's skill in crafting vivid images such as these demonstrates her rhetorical methodology, emotionally evoking pity or anger, weakness or strength, femininity or masculinity, seemingly at will.

No feminine understanding or mercy softens the words, themes, or ramifications of her Jewish fantasy. If, as Gail Berkeley Sherman suggests, her protagonist is "a feminized speaker in the economy that grants only male subjects the right to authorized speech,"<sup>22</sup> she nevertheless breaks out of her assigned boundaries, thereby shocking her audience at four levels by 1) her unwarranted hostility, 2) the contrast between her concern for mice and humans, 3) her firm insistence on the rightness of punishment, and 4) her rejection of mercy. Her interior toughness of spirit so at odds with her exterior feminine gentleness is perhaps less hypocrisy than androgyny, a wearing of both gender identities but here privileging the dominant masculine. As Hahn suggests, "For the purposes of male consumption—that is for the survival of her identity—she must simultaneously appear the same—an integral part of masculine hierarchies—and yet other—a woman, 'a Nonne, a Prioress . . . ful symple and coy' (118-19), content to be herself. This is an act that requires a good deal of talent at masquerade."<sup>23</sup> Her performative ability to do so is magnificent. Perhaps this perpetual masquerading ultimately effects a fusion of the two gender characteristics into a type of androgyny.

The Prioress's Tale of martyrdom encompasses various degrees of strength and assertiveness, beginning with an active rather than

passive acquisition of holiness, and a willing adoption of Christ's suffering, possibly by dangerous singing in hostile territory. Perhaps both the boy and his mentor the Prioress sought the glory of martyrdom; W.H.C. Frend quotes the seventh-century romance *Barlaam and Joasaph*, which claims that "Monasticism . . . arose from men's desires to become martyrs in will, that they might not miss the glory of them who were made perfect by blood. . . . The extremes of mortification and self-torture to which the monk subjected himself might be compared to the pangs endured by the martyr, and the punishment even of being eaten by wild beasts was simulated by some of the more venturesome spirits."<sup>24</sup> The taste for blood of this particular religious, and the sensationalism of that taste within the tale, reflect a strong involvement with and stomach for violence. Methodius links virginity with martyrdom, indicating the blessed "are martyrs, not by enduring brief corporeal pains for a space of time, but because they had the courage all their lives not to shrink from the truly Olympic contest of chastity. And by resisting the fierce torments of pleasure and fear and grief and other evils . . . they carry off the first prize."<sup>25</sup> Such hyperbolic, and even physically based bravery, might be considered more traditionally masculine than feminine. It might well be attributed to this prioress who vicariously accepts martyrdom.

Despite the claim of victimization, emphasis on the loud, persistent singing of the little clergeon suggests his active agency, conscious or otherwise, and perhaps an unconscious desire for martyrdom, achieved through assertive masculine behavior—courage, endurance. Although the actions of his distraught mother had no effect on the outcome of her son's situation, she nevertheless actively searches for him. The determined efforts of the city official ultimately uncover the whereabouts of the young boy, actions Eglantine applauds. The religious leader of the community takes it upon himself to end the boy's singing by removing the grain from under his tongue. In the Prioress's world, actions have clear and desirable consequences.

Assertiveness is a virtue because it accomplishes the desired end. Reticence and demure behavior are not rewarded, however aristocratically correct they may be.

**3. Characterization:** Eglantine has skillfully delineated several male characters in her tale who share traits traditionally considered “masculine.” Foremost among these traits are the characters’ strong sense of active determination and a formidable will by which to carry out their desires. Further, these characters possess the ability, strength, and skill to enact their will. Despite his later victimhood, initially the “litel clergeon, seven yeer of age” (VII 503) has determined to memorize the Latin “Alma Redemptoris,” and sets out to accomplish this task with the help of his elder male companion. With diligence he commits to memorizing the song by Christmas, if it takes ignoring his catechism and being beaten. He is successful. Nor is his simply an intellectual decision, for he physically marches through the Jewish community day after day, singing this song, however foolish this deed might be.

Secondly, the Prioress has depicted a community of Jews who she says “han conspired / This innocent out of this world to chace” (VII 565-66). This they accomplish by hiring the hitman, who “kitte his throte, and in a pit hym caste” (VII 571). Such aggressive behavior is more properly categorized as masculine than feminine, however reprehensible Eglantine or the audience might find it. For good or ill, the deed is effective. That such a woman has chosen a tale of violent aggression and forced brutality—the same woman who finds worthy of tears a mouse caught in a trap—is remarkable. This is no story of tender joy and reconciliation, forgiveness and love, kindness and gentility.

The Prioress does, however, pity the poor widow, this “newe Rachel” who cannot locate her son, but paints her as impotent—to protect her son, find his body without supernatural intervention, or effect revenge. Rather it is Jesus who inspires her to locate his body and the provost who sentences the perpetrator to hideous

reprisals. As Condren suggests, "Even when the widow finally does locate her son, the Prioress ignores the emotional scene we might easily imagine,"<sup>26</sup> a distinctly unwomanly response. The forceful determination to enact justice "by the lawe" (VII 634) displayed by that provost marks him as a man of action and power.

The holy abbot likewise takes things into his hands in asking the slain young boy to explain the cause of his singing, and determines to remove the grain from his tongue. He thus controls the ending of the mystical experience and frees the child from his burden. In each case, the boys and men are doers, powerful agents who accomplish what they attempt—even the infant St. Nicholas, who assertively rejects the breast to fast in holiness. As the teller of these vignettes, the Prioress shares in their masculine power. Unlike the pitiful mother who watches ineffectually, the men influence the situation and outcome according to their agenda by force of will and active plot intervention. Condren notes that "The widow's inability to locate her son parallels, both thematically and structurally, the *Prologue's* claim that no tongue can express Mary's attributes"<sup>27</sup>—at least not this woman's tongue. Even the Blessed Virgin is unable to protect her devoted little singer from masculine invasion of his person, allowing him only a brief reprieve from his inevitable death. This vision of potent, heroic masculinity posited by the Prioress, one of strength and efficacy, colors her male characters in vivid hues. Her adroit telling, even manipulation of the legend (which in most versions does not end with the boy's death), enhances audience awareness of her professional expertise.

### III. Conclusion

Madame Eglantine's polite, seemingly feminine courtly romance exterior is rather an artificial pose. Although certain physical attributes mark her as feminine, her obsession with the virginity of the chaste Mary (with its attendant childlessness) and her assertive

masculine personality, drawn to retribution, violence, and aggression, undercut her representation as a consistent feminine personality. Rather, she presents a psychologically androgynous fusion of genders, feminine on the outside, masculine on the inside. Behind her deferential facade of conformity, behind her mask of passivity and helplessness, behind her protective Benedictine habit lie a strong and competent mind, a forceful and incisive spirit, a determined and aggressive competence: in short, an independent and in fact androgynous composite. There is little that convincingly marks her as essentially feminine in her personality, for her habit of mind, her responses to situations, her venomous aggression indicate a contrary mindset. Nothing less would have accounted for her effective rise to ecclesiastical power or her militant tale of murder, martyrdom, and vengeance, harsher than most analogues. Thus, this seemingly sexless woman of great dynamism and force, often appearing, acting, and speaking in ways as much masculine as feminine, presents a demeanor and mystique, an aura and attitude more truly androgynously gendered than sexed. If Geoffrey Chaucer seeks to recount multifarious characters of varied dispositions, this conception of Madame Eglantine as androgynous is a superb opportunity to fashion a unique Prioress among his provocative pilgrims. Once again, he was eminently successful.

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Notes

<sup>1</sup> A shorter version of this paper was delivered at the meeting of the New Chaucer Society in Paris in July 1998.

<sup>2</sup> H. F. Brooks, *Chaucer's Pilgrims* (London: Methuen, 1962) 15-19; 31-33; Priscilla Martin, *Chaucer's Women: Nun's, Wives, and Amazons* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1990) 37; Muriel Bowden, *A Commentary on the General Prologue* (London: Macmillan, 1948) 92-104, 214-29; and George Lyman Kittredge, *Chaucer and His Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP 1915; 14th reprint, 1967) 176-77.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Hahn, "The Performance of Gender in the Prioress," *Chaucer Yearbook* 1 (1992): 117.

<sup>4</sup> Peggy Knapp, *Chaucer and the Social Context* (New York: Routledge, 1990) 49.

<sup>5</sup> *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton, 1987). Subsequent quotations will be taken from this edition.

<sup>6</sup> Martin 31, 32.

<sup>7</sup> Gale Berkeley Sherman, "Saints, Nuns and Speech in the *Canterbury Tales*," *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe*, ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Timea Szell (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991) 140.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel F. Pigg, "Refiguring Martyrdom: Chaucer's Prioress and Her Tale," *Chaucer Review* 29 (1994): 69.

<sup>9</sup> Edward I. Condren, "The Prioress: A Legend of Spirit, a Life of Flesh," *Chaucer Review* 23 (1989): 195.



<sup>10</sup> Condren 192.

<sup>11</sup> Hardy Long Frank, "Seeing the Prioress Whole," *Chaucer Review* 25 (1991): 232.

<sup>12</sup> Frank 232.

<sup>13</sup> Frank 229.

<sup>14</sup> Frank 230.

<sup>15</sup> Eileen Power, *Medieval English Nunneries* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1922) 69.

<sup>16</sup> Frank 230-31.

<sup>17</sup> Pigg 65, 66.

<sup>18</sup> Richard H. Osberg, "A Voice for the Prioress: The Context of English Devotional Prose," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 18 (1996): 25.

<sup>19</sup> Ralph W. V. Elliott, "Chaucer's Clerical Voices," in *Medieval English Religious and Ethical Literature, Essays in Honour of G. H. Russell*, G. Kratzmann and J. Simpson, eds. (Cambridge: Brewer, 1986) 146-55.

<sup>20</sup> Derek A. Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales* (London: Allen, 1985) 248.

<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Robertson, "Aspects of Female Piety in the *Prioress's Tale*," in *Chaucer's Religious Tales*, C. David Benson and Elizabeth Robertson, eds. (Cambridge: Brewer, 1990) 146.

<sup>22</sup> Sherman 138.

<sup>23</sup> Hahn 115.

<sup>24</sup> W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: A Study of a Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1967) 404.

<sup>25</sup> Methodius, *The Symposium: A Treatise on Chastity*, trans. Herbert Musurillo, *Ancient Christian Writers* (Westminster, MD: 1958, 27: 99). Quoted in Pigg 68.

<sup>26</sup> Condren 204.

<sup>27</sup> Condren 201.